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BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS

John E. Conklin
*Campus Life in the Movies: A Critical Survey
from the Silent Era to the Present.*

Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2009. vii, 224 pp.

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The first few pages of John Conklin's *Campus Life in the Movies* have the uneasy feel of a blurb for viewing an Olympic competition. Between 2002 and 2008, Conklin, a Professor of Sociology at Tufts University, watched 589 feature-length films about the collegiate experience set in the United States and released between 1915 and 2006. Conklin does not think of film studies as an arena of scholarly debate but as a competition about who can watch the most films, and seems to believe that the scholar who views the most films is the winner. Conklin boasts that now he is the champion: "this is more than the number of movies used in two previous books" (2). He has beaten Wiley Lee Umphlett's record of viewing 237 films for *The Movies Go to College: Hollywood and the World of the College life Film* (1984), and trounced David B. Hinton's *Celluloid Ivy: Higher Education in the Movies 1960–1990* (1994) by a factor of ten, and in just 224 pages.

Campus Life in the Movies represents a staggering achievement. That one scholar, unaided, could watch 589 films is a feat that begs the imagination. It is probably well to remember that writers, generally speaking, are unconventional people, with all manner of personality quirks. But Conklin's obsessive desire to view every college film ever produced in the U.S. has this virtue; he has uncovered the existence of a neglected film genre, a long overlooked Alexandrian Archive of films about the undergraduate college experience.

Hollywood is a fickle mistress. Before it fell in love with the late John Hughes and high schools and adolescents, it nurtured a more than century-long romance with colleges, universities, and campus life. Who would have thought it? Now all those earnest print texts published about the history of higher education or about the college experience will have to move over to make room for the college film, a major

and heretofore neglected part of higher education's historical record.

Campus Life in the Movies consists of nine chapters, topically arranged. The arc of the book's trajectory proceeds from admissions to extra-curricula activities, to joining a Greek house, to athletics, to academics, to love and romance, to graduation, and then to becoming an alumni activist. The book is illustrated by sixty-six marvelous lobby cards (those ubiquitous 11x14 movie posters we see in theaters) and it contains sparse Chapter Notes—a complete Filmography, a Bibliography and an Index. Billed as a “critical survey,” *Campus Life in the Movies* is certainly a survey, but hardly critical. Snippets of the 589 films come at the reader in swift and relentless torrents. The book exercises hardly any judgment or evidences any standards. Conklin ventures no “best,” or “ten best” or even a “one hundred best” college films. Conklin cannot even acknowledge, for example, that a film by Mike Nichols about the college experience might be more significant than one by Elliott Nugent about that experience. The Chapter Notes are heavily dependant on Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz' splendid *Campus Life: Undergraduate Cultures from the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (1987), which demonstrates finally that Conklin can exercise some discrimination.

Conklin cautiously ventures some interpretation: e.g., “The many football-and-romance movies of the 1930s probably shaped popular views of campus life” (1), *National Lampoon's Animal House* (1978), “might have altered the behavior of first year students by changing their expectations of campus life”(5). One last example: “Over the years, college movies have influenced the way people perceive the undergraduate experience by both distorting it and accurately mirroring it” (3). Well, yes, that's what productions of the mind, like film, do: they distort and they mirror. But which college films did more or less of either? And which films are more significant for it? “At the very least,” Conklin concludes, “nearly a century's worth of college films has *not* (my italics) fostered an image of the campus as a place dominated by hard-working students intent on getting the best possible education” (6). For help in understanding intellectual life in academe over the decades, readers should of course consult Richard Hofstadter's 1964 Pulitzer Prize-winning *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*.

The Professors? In college films, our apathetic or roistering students deserve the professors they get: hopelessly pedantic, uninterested, unmotivated, sadistic, and lecherous crackpots or misfits. Conklin identifies sixty college movies that include a romantic or sexual relationship between an undergraduate and a faculty member (84). It is probably fortunate that professors do not often attend to popular culture images that circulate around them. In depicting professors, the main trope in the college film is caricature. Lucky for readers of *HSE/RHE*, filmmakers seem to have concluded that professors of history are not even good subjects for caricature; professors of history are never mentioned in any of the films discussed in the above film books. Only professors of English or creative writing have all the fun.

The main emplotment device that underlies Conklin's narrative is a superficial contextual determinism. Thus, some event occurs in the nation's social or political life—a war breaks out; war or protest films are produced. The country suffers the Great Depression, escapist football and song-and-dance films become the order of

the day. The GI Bill is passed? This is followed by films in which everyone goes to college—even a chimpanzee (“Bonzo goes to College,” 1952). Conklin assumes a one-to-one relationship between socio-political context and film. Almost nothing is allowed to happen in the filmmaker’s imagination. Conklin actually misses the chief value of *Campus Life in the Movies*—what Bazin, Kracauer, Pierre Sorlin, Marc Ferro, and American philosopher, Stanley Cavell, celebrated about film—its realism, film’s recreation of an “archive of material reality,” the look, atmosphere, dress, manners, habitat, the quotidian details of, in our case, college life, a culture, long lost to history. This is what Bill Nichols meant when he declared, “every film is a documentary.”

Thanks to Conklin, the Umphlett and Hinton books have come to our attention. And now, most significantly, we must acknowledge that reconstructing the past of the American college is a broad historical enterprise that cannot be confined to a narrow circle of academic print texts; film has a legitimate role to play in the enterprise. *Campus Life in the Movies* is a crammed anthology, but there are some small pleasures along the way. I have already mentioned the wonderful movie posters strewn throughout the book. And all in all, *Campus Life in the Movies*, as someone said of the Oxford Book of Quotations, is “a glorious treasure house for browsers.”